

SPIRITUALISM

SPIRITUALISM may roughly be described as a belief in the existence and life of a spirit in man, apart from and independent of, his material organism, and in the possibility of intelligent intercourse between spirits embodied and disembodied.

Needless to say, if the fact of such intercourse is established religion cannot hope for long to remain unaffected by it. "The authority of creeds and Churches," wrote the great spiritualist F. W. H. Myers, "will be replaced by the authority of observation and experiment. The impulse of faith will resolve itself into a reasoned and resolute imagination, bent upon raising even higher than now the highest ideals of man."^{*} I quote this utterance because it is eminently temperate and lies midway between the extreme opinions of those who, like Sir William Barrett, would prefer to keep psychical research quite distinct from religion, and those who, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, assert unhesitatingly that, for them, Spiritualism "*is* religion."

As Christian teachers we are doubtful if Spiritualism is friend or foe. We suspect it. But all the same we are called upon to adopt some attitude towards it, and we find this no simple task. So long as Spiritualism was pilloried as witchcraft, it was enough to say: "This is plainly the work of the Devil"; "These practices have always been condemned in God's Word"; "Beware of black magic!" But for two reasons it has become increasingly difficult to be content with this position. The first is that a large number of people, who have resorted to Spiritualism for consolation owing to the war, have come to suspect the explanation of devils as no more than a cover for ignorance on the part of the clergy. The second is that Spiritualism has engaged the attention and, in many cases, the support of some of our leading scientists and University professors. As a result, it can now be satisfactorily dealt with only after a careful survey of the results of scientific inquiry.

Coming to our subject, we find a doubt often expressed as to how far spiritualistic happenings are legitimate material for investigation. The reply to this is that these happenings occur in the first instance *unmasked and unsought for*. They are not solely the product of séances, mediums, and so forth. For example, Sir William Barrett tells[†] of some acquaintances of his who were not spiritualists, who were puzzled and annoyed by raps and other inexplicable noises that frequently occurred when their daughter Florrie, a frank, intelligent child, aged

* *Human Personality* (abridged edition), p. 341; cf. p. 7.

† *On the Threshold of the Unseen*, pp. 38, etc.

about ten years, was present. The greatest precautions were taken to detect fraud or trickery, but finally he and the parents were fully convinced of the genuineness of these occurrences. Here are psychical phenomena occurring, so to speak, spontaneously. And why may not a scientist examine them as well as the phenomena of electricity or chemistry? Risks there may be, but, as somebody has observed, we do not stop chemical inquiry because foolish people poison themselves.

The phenomena of Spiritualism include, firstly, the movement of material bodies—chairs, tables, etc.—by what is termed psychic force; and, secondly, communications supposed to come from disembodied spirits.

In connection with the movements of material bodies, Dr. Crawford, a Doctor of Science and Lecturer on Mechanical Engineering at Belfast, conducted experiments with the aid of a medium where, *with no one touching it*, a table rose some 18 inches in the air and remained so suspended. Sir William Barrett, who was present, failed to lower it, though he jumped upon it and sat there till he was tipped off. Then the table turned upside down of its own accord, and when he tried to move it, it was as firmly pressed to the ground as if it had been screwed there. On the same occasion two pieces of a metal trumpet rose in the air and dodged all his efforts to hold them. When invited to take hold of them he found he could move them to and fro, but they resisted every twisting motion so firmly that it was for all the world as though the bases of the separate parts were embedded in solid concrete. Those who doubt the sanity of all this must read for themselves. Unquestionably these phenomena are vouched for on very strong security.

Now suppose for a moment they are genuine, then at once the old accusation that table-tilting was due to the unconscious pressure of some sitter has to be abandoned. Moreover—and this is most important—it is manifest that we find here something akin to physical force. Spiritualists judge it to be an *intelligent* force. Force of some kind there certainly is. Dr. Crawford used weights and measures, and showed that when a table (weighing 10 lbs. 6 ozs.) was levitated without contact—the medium being seated on a scale—the weight of the medium was increased by approximately that of the table (9 lbs. 12 ozs.). The resistance of the table to movement, when levitated, was at a maximum when the table was pushed downwards and towards the medium at an angle of 45 degrees. This indicated some connection between the psychic force and the medium, and the conclusion was immensely strengthened by experiments with a movable electric bell-push. Dr. Crawford prepared a bell-push so delicately adjusted that a slight breath

would establish contact and cause a bell to ring. Imagine the table to be levitated. If the bell-push was placed on the floor directly underneath no ring was produced. When the bell-push was raised to a height of about 2 feet above the floor, pressure was registered and the bell rang.* By repeated experiments it seemed natural to conclude that there was some path of force outward from the medium that proceeded in the shape of a curve to the underside of the table. As to the nature of this force, Dr. Crawford admitted its mystery. The most he did was to offer a tentative hypothesis. He was inclined to think it a form of chemical energy associated with the human nervous system.

At this point a few observations may be justified. The evidence at disposal appears to point to some kind of personal force as the cause of these phenomena. The nature of this force is at present uncertain, but, so far as can be judged, it by no means suggests the necessity of discarnate spirits. For this reason, it seems unwise to take it for granted, as some are disposed to do, that all spiritual phenomena are due to devils. If it transpires they are not due to spirits either good or bad, the "religious" explanation will be as discredited as the spiritualist. The spirits will be proved an illusion, and the devils exposed as a bogey. It would seem to be wiser to expect the discovery of some new personal force. Those, of course, who reject any theory of psychic force are likely to find themselves presented with a statistical table of pounds per square inch for the pressure of devils.

These phenomena bear more directly on religion than is commonly recognized. Spiritualists have not been slow to link them up with what they affirm to be similar instances in history—ancient and modern. It will occasion us less surprise, then, to find that from the New Testament the "levitations, the tongues of fire, the rushing wind, the spiritual gifts, the working of wonders" are classed as phenomena familiar to spiritualists; or that the "materialization of the two prophets upon the mountain" (*i.e.*, of Transfiguration) is held to be "extraordinarily accurate when judged by psychic law."† We may quite happily regard this attempt to embrace all spiritual marvels within the fold of Spiritualism as premature and inconclusive.

Now let us consider the question of supposed communications from departed spirits. We observe at the outset that all intercourse between human mind and human mind is

* *Reality of Psychic Phenomena*, pp. 91, etc.

† *New Revelation*, by Sir A. Conan Doyle, pp. 77, 79. Cf. *The Vital Message*, p. 161.

normally *indirect*. Whenever a thought is transferred from one mind to another, it is by way of physical media. When I read a letter from a friend, the pen, paper, and writing of my friend, and my own optic nerves, are in a true sense the media of thought transference. Now Spiritualism asserts that intercourse can be *direct*—*i.e.*, apart from any of the known channels of sense. And since, usually, our bodily organism provides the normal channel of communication, this is tantamount to saying that intercourse is possible between minds embodied and minds disembodied.

We do well to recognize what follows if this sort of communication can be proved. The departed, it may be presumed, have not physical bodies as we have, composed of earthly particles. "But," it will be argued, "the want of such a body cannot be held to make intercourse impossible, if it has been shown that intercourse can take place apart from the bodily organism."

It would take too long to give in full the reasonings which are thought to establish such direct communication as possible, but they are so fundamental that they must at least be indicated.

It is allowed, then, that for man in his ordinary state of consciousness, communication with his fellows is ordinarily through the bodily organism—*i.e.*, through physical media.

But, it is immediately added, man's ordinary consciousness does not reveal his full personality. Indeed, at any given moment, it is only a very little that consciousness tells us of ourselves. Bound up with our full personality is a multitude of past experiences, conversations, joys, sorrows, of which only a comparative few are ordinarily present to consciousness. At a given word they come back to our consciousness—we remember them, as we say—but otherwise, while they belong to the full make-up of our personality, they are not part of our conscious life.

The aim, then, of the spiritualist will be to endeavour to shut off ordinary consciousness and to allow the full personality to emerge in its entirety. And here we discover the why and wherefore of the medium's trance. The trance of the medium is employed to place ordinary consciousness in abeyance. The person is for the time undisturbed by the diverting impressions which crowd in through the eye, the ear, etc., and is the more ready for a direct communication, supposing this can occur. Another method used to obtain a similar result is crystal-gazing. This is regarded as a highly specialized form of "brown study," which permits an unusual degree of freedom to the subconscious self. And in these states of trance communications undoubtedly come.

Before dealing further with the subject of the medium's trance, we may consider the alleged communications. A study of them reveals much that is self-contradictory, much that is more or less obvious fabrication of data furnished by sitters, and much that is remarkable for its accuracy. Cases of fabrication and shuffling are abundant. A crowning instance of this kind occurred when Dr. Hall* asked for a fictitious niece, Bessie Beals, who was produced and was communicating fairly fully by the third sitting. When told that there was no such person as Bessie Beals, it was still maintained that she was there, and that her mother had asked about her before; then it was admitted that a mistake had been made after all, and that her name was Jessie Beals! So again, for purposes of evidence,† a spirit at a séance in America was asked to describe a certain séance in England and to convey messages. The spirit gave the American sitters all they asked for, but later it was found that the house in England was wrongly described, the phenomena *there* witnessed wrongly represented, and that no messages had been received in spite of the spirit's assertion to this effect.

Yet, granted that these messages are not genuine, they still require to be explained scientifically. The bent tree has its explanation no less than the straight one, and there are, as has been said, many communications that are remarkable for their accuracy, as, for example, the one relating to the group photo mentioned in *Raymond*. The spiritualist offers us the spirit hypothesis. What is it worth?

Without dispute, it *does* cover a good many of the facts. According to the spirits' own version, something like what we understand by "possession" takes place in regard to the medium. This will account, in cases where it occurs, for the medium's voice or handwriting approximating to the voice or handwriting of the communicator while on earth. Most important of all, it has an answer for the question, "Where do the communications come from?" It offers a definite and intelligible source for information given in communications, which is outside the knowledge of anybody on earth, as, for example, where someone inserts a finger at random in a newspaper and asks for the word at which the finger points, the answer being correctly given.

Mistakes will be accounted for in various ways. There are difficulties on the other side. Spirits become aware of a medium through a special psychic light connected with him. Approach to this light dazes them. They are not certain if they really get messages through. They feel an inability to describe their new surroundings. There are drawbacks, too, in connection

* *Proc. S.P.R.*, pp. 177, 178.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 509, 510.

with the medium. In the trance state, he is extremely open to the power of suggestion from others, and often may be giving his own subconscious ideas or those telepathically received from other living minds.

But the first criticism of this hypothesis is not concerned so much with the fact that some communications are genuine and others false. The astounding thing is that false messages are given with exactly the same assurances of sincerity as true ones. An absolutely unsatisfactory part of the spirit theory is that it provides no criterion for distinguishing messages as true or false. A spiritualist may try to help matters by accounting for the mistakes, but the conviction persists that, when all allowance has been made for possible causes of mistakes, *the supposed spirits themselves are unable to distinguish the true from the false!* And it is impossible not to be suspicious of the whole spirit theory when we reflect that this curious shortcoming is one of the marked characteristics of a person in an hypnotic trance!

A bewildering faculty for impersonation is manifested by a hypnotised person. Tell him he is a total abstainer and he will denounce the drink habit. Tell him he believes in moderate drinking and he will proceed to contradict all he has just said. Here we find three of the characteristics of supposed spirit controls:

- (1) The appearance of an apparently new personality.
- (2) Ingenuity in filling the part.
- (3) Desire for consistency, but complete inability to distinguish the true from the false.

Now hypnotism appears to be a phase of the personality responding to the promptings of suggestion, and there may be reason to think that a similar process occurs in the spiritualistic trance. A spiritualist may claim that the suggestion comes from a departed spirit. This cannot be allowed to have been proved. Take, for example, two famous supposed spirit-controls whose communications can be read in the proceedings of the S.P.R.—Sir Walter Scott and Stainton Moses. We find that Sir Walter Scott appeared as control, *for the first time*, the day after the sitter had been reading his *Life and Letters*. We find that Stainton Moses took control, *for the first time*, the day after the sitter had been reading that gentleman's book, *Spirit Teachings!** Here we may feel justified in supposing that nothing more was happening than the medium responding to some subconscious suggestion on the part of the sitter. Over and over again subconscious suggestion from this side proves

* S.P.R., vol. xxviii., p. 85.

to be the rule. Each attempt to bring forward some clear exception just fails to be convincing. We feel as people might who, being very hazy about the laws of magnetism, were urged to believe that the power of a magnet to attract iron filings was quite plainly the work of an indwelling spirit.

Let us pause to recognize that we are confronted by a great mystery. We have yet to learn the full limits of our personal influence! And it is for scientists to discover for us the laws which govern this subconscious suggestion and intercourse between personalities. A case is recorded where a wife, at the very moment her husband was killed in the war, had a detailed and exact vision of the scene. By what process? Vivid dreams are afterwards verified in fact. What are the laws which apply? What is the true explanation of premonitions? If telepathy be a fact, what circumstances regulate it, and what are its limitations? How far does the subconscious influence of one mind on another leave its traces after a person is "dead"?

It will be admitted freely, we believe, that Christianity has a duty to interest itself vitally in the problem whether such messages come from spirits or merely from suggestion on "this side." Christianity, as the Bible affords ample witness, has a recognized place for the influence of both angels and devils. Of the former it asks, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" The latter comprise "the Devil and his angels." They also have their work—they seek whom they may devour. These spiritual influences, it will be noticed, are regarded as definitely moral, either good or bad. And Christianity has one great test by which they may be tried. Do they, or do they not, bear witness to Christ incarnate? "Hereby know ye the spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God." The anxiety of Christianity in the present instance does not arise solely from fear of possible bad spiritual influence: it arises because, so long as clear proof of spirit communication is wanting, there is the awful possibility of people placing their trust in what may be a most pitiable delusion.

We are face to face with the facts that a large number of people attach credibility to the communications received, and that this is doing an untold amount of harm. Spiritualists of understanding admit freely that no supposed communications, whether through private persons or professional mediums, should be accepted uncritically at their face value. "A good deal of this struck me as nonsense," is one of the remarks of Sir

Oliver Lodge during the séances mentioned in *Raymond*. Professor Barrett tells us that even substantial agreement among communicators may be due to nothing more than a reflection of the common opinion of mediums generally.

The actual fact is that communications differ exceedingly. One so-called spirit saying declares that in their statements spirits "will differ indefinitely according to their different temperaments, and the manner of soul they are. . . . There will be any number of creeds based upon after-death experiences, which vary according to the character of the individual. . . . For instance, you will not find . . . any authoritative declaration as to any religion that will be recognized as true by all the spirits communicating. They are of all stages and phases, and the religion of some will be absolutely unthinkable by others."* (Note curious use of future tense—"You *will* not find," etc. It is so exactly what we on this side of the grave should say !)

Another supposed spirit says, "I believe absolutely in the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Immaculate Conception," distinguishes Christ from Buddha, Mahomet, and Confucius by his unique divine origin, and holds a sound doctrine of the Holy Trinity.† Other communications could be given to bear out Sir Oliver Lodge's statements that the spirits "always insist that their information is but little greater than ours," and that they are still "fallible gropers after truth": that they "are making progress through darkness into light, through ignorance into knowledge." "We have nothing to tell you," another supposed spirit-saying goes, "that was not known to the seers and that was not declared by Jesus."

On the other hand, when we turn to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's accounts of Spiritualism, as given in *The Vital Message*, or *The New Revelation*, we find almost a total absence of the caution that marks Sir Oliver Lodge's writings. The would-be simplicity of it all almost provokes a smile. He does indeed admit that "opinion is not absolutely uniform yonder, any more than it is here," but sweeps this difficulty lightly to one side and makes it quite plain that he is prepared to accept the general opinion of spirit communicators. According to this, no religion upon earth has any advantage over another. There are orders of spirits and Christ is the greatest Spirit of whom they have cognizance, though he is not God. He came down to earth to set an example. There is nothing of Atonement or Redemption. Hell is a blasphemous conception. Belief in Purgatory is justified by reports. There are probationary

* *After Death*, aman. W. T. Stead, pp. 77, 78.

† *Speaking across the Border Line*, by P. Heslop, p. 58.

spheres—hospitals for weakly souls. Otherwise conditions of life in the beyond are pleasant. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is so impressed by this view of Christianity that he gives it some measure of finality. The sooner the Bible is put on the shelf the better, and as for modern religious beliefs, "Christianity," he writes, "must change or perish."* As a general principle this may be intelligible, but in the sense which he conveys, we can only reject the assertion as an unwarranted presumption.

General accounts from the newly-passed-over would make it appear that at first they do not know they are dead, and are a long time understanding that their conditions are changed. The individual finds himself in a spirit body, the exact counterpart of his old one, save that all weakness or deformity has passed from it. As he is still in his old surroundings, he is met by other spirits and then, by the guidance of a guardian angel, goes out upon his new life. A period of sleep usually occurs here, and afterwards strength returns and new life begins. Those who have interests in common are united, life is full of interest and occupation. Life beyond is for a limited period, and then they pass to other and ever higher spheres. It is pre-eminently a life of the mind. Preoccupations of food, money, lust, pain, etc., are of the body and are gone. Music, the Arts, intellectual and spiritual knowledge, have increased. The spiritual world would seem to be a kind of counterpart of the physical world with flowers, etc. Spiritual bodies may be made visible at will. Those who die as children here grow naturally to maturity in the world beyond.

It hardly needs to be explained that such "impressions from beyond" are here given in their most coherent form, regardless of the uncertainty, the insecurity, and even the nonsense which attends them. And even so, when this concession is made, where is the exalted spiritual information for which human souls yearn? Where are the traces of new illumination that may be supposed to be theirs who have passed beyond the veil, and are by at least one step nearer to God? We fail to find them. Instead, perhaps, we may find one spirit describing as a "nice old fellow, but profane," another spirit who, in earlier days, in the spirit world "used to swear like a Turk." Is it to be wondered at that those who are familiar with the lofty spirituality of the Old Testament prophets should regard these communications by comparison as paltry, uninspiring, and profoundly disappointing?

It is to be observed that, according to the supposed communications, sex, language, sight, hearing, mental equipment, and the rest, still continue in the world beyond. Dr. Jacks,

* *New Revelation*, p. 70.

in his Presidential Address before the S.P.R., said they could not be set down off-hand as belonging to a world wholly different from this. "If you find sex, you find much more than sex—namely, a whole biological system; if you find vision, you find light, and if the light, then everything that goes with the light, and this gradually expands into wider and wider contexts until you get the whole order of nature as we know it here and now." He lays stress on the point that the other world from all accounts would seem to be so much like this, that "it is hard to resist the conclusion that they are one and the same." The same thought seems to be in Sir Oliver Lodge's mind when he writes that the spirits "are no longer in *matter* truly, and therefore can no longer appeal to our organs of sense . . . but for all we know, they may exist in the ether and be as aware of space and of the truths of geometry, though not of geography, as we are." "Let us not be too sure," he says, "that their condition and surroundings are altogether and utterly different from those of mankind."*

We must leave spiritualists to settle this problem. And meanwhile, all the accounts may be, as we are disposed to think they are, nothing more than a bizarre attempt on the part of our subconscious minds to picture the conditions which prevail in the world of spirit, with no more information on the subject than is to be had from observation of this physical world and from human conjectures in regard to its development.

Christian teaching about the life beyond is so largely symbolic, that in our case, *e.g.*, we are under no obligation to furnish particulars as to spiritual anatomy because we speak of "God's right hand," nor to offer a complete theory of spiritual metallurgy because the Bible refers to angels swinging censers. The opposite holds in regard to Spiritualism, just because it insists that its details are actually real. Yet the theory of a spiritual body in a spiritual world forms part of our Christian belief, and calls for more attention and explanation than we usually give it. Protestantism has inclined to the view of a final spiritual transformation immediately following death. But this is as severe a jolt to our religious instincts as Milton's conception of the lion appearing full grown at the word of creation or of plants suddenly coming to existence in full flower. Protestantism has effectually eliminated Indulgences, but reason clamours aloud, "Surely, not all who die are fit at once for the presence of God." The Church of England in some measure is returning unofficially to a belief in Purgatory, punitive, remedial, and educational. It is difficult not to believe that this is right.

* *Survival of Man*, by Sir O. Lodge, p. 235.

Scientists like Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir William Barrett have given their opinion that Spiritualism is a matter for the student using scientific methods of procedure. They do not advise it for ordinary people, though they think no great harm will come if reasonable precautions are taken. There are great dangers connected with it. There is the scientific danger of people uncritically supposing all communications true, and to this we may add the moral peril of people taking for spiritual revelation what is, after all, only a mirage reflected from their own subconscious selves. There is danger of some allowing their wills to be invaded by a lower order of intelligence or morality. There is danger for those who are merely curious, or who wish to perpetuate a sinful relationship. Mediums need supervision to see that no excessive drain is made on their vitality, or possible harm done to their true self-hood.

The attraction of Spiritualism consists in this: it offers actual intercourse with the departed, and actual detailed knowledge of life beyond. We will refer to this again in one moment, but, without in any degree minimizing the importance of such intercourse or such knowledge, supposing either can be proved, the most that can be said of Spiritualism is that its function would be contributory and supplementary. It could be in no sense a substitute for religion, and we oppose entirely Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's dictum that "Spiritualism is Religion."* Religion is more than a knowledge of the facts of existence here or in the world beyond, more than companionship with spirits still in process of growth and enlightenment. It is an intimate union between finite man and his infinite God, which transcends the power of utterance, and which must outreach human knowledge so long as man has yet to attain, and until, spiritually perfected and transformed into the fulness of God's glory, he knows even as he is known.

We cannot allow it for one moment to be assumed that what we mean by "the soul" is identical with the "psychic self" of Spiritualism, or that the word "spiritual" as used by spiritualists means for us what it means for them. St. Paul drew a distinction between the psychic or natural man (*i.e.*, the man endowed with all his natural qualities) and the spiritual man (*i.e.*, man gifted in addition with a soul and living his life in response to the promptings of God the Holy Spirit). We regard that distinction as valid, and applying it to Spiritualism we infer that man's psychic nature (for the existence of which we have increasing evidence) is as much a husk of the soul as is his physical nature. If that is so, then, as Sir William Barrett has said, "the psychical order is not the spiritual order,

* *The New Revelation*, p. 67.

for it deals . . . only with the *external*, though it be in an unseen world; and its chief value lies in the fulfilment of its work, whereby it reveals to us the inadequacy of the external, either here or hereafter, to satisfy the life of the soul."

Bearing in mind the meaning Christianity attaches to the word "spiritual," we can hardly fail to notice that the satisfaction which Spiritualism yields to its followers belongs to the order of things sensible, tangible—might we not almost say, physical? For it answers the yearning:

"But, O, for the touch of a vanished hand
And the sound of a voice that is still!"

The soul, sooner or later, experiences a craving for fleshly aids in most of its great ventures of faith—"Give us a sign," "Lord, show us the Father and it sufficeth us." Meanwhile never, perhaps, more than at present, has the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints needed to be clearly taught. The popular interest in Spiritualism at least bears some witness to the unsatisfied needs of a large number of human souls. The Christian doctrine is magnificent and strong: Christians are one in Christ and one in each other, and death is powerless to break that union. It is a living, active relationship which can be maintained and strengthened "in Sacrament and prayer." And it exists between those who are "knit together in one communion and fellowship" in the mystical body of Jesus Christ, in a bond which is eternal.

H. J. C. MATTHEWS.

HISTORY AND RELIGION *

I REMEMBER how, when I was a Fellow of this College—as I was for seven fortunate years—and morning after morning came down the College lane to my work, I would look up at the tower over the gateway, and, dreaming first of what it must have looked like when its stones were still clean and white from the mason's chisel, would then fall to thinking about its five centuries of weathering, and to wondering what the Founder would say if he saw it, and us who were part of it, at the present day. In the course of time it became impossible for me to think of the College apart from its past; and that was my only way of understanding it. The essence of the College lay for me neither in the early apostolic days of the Founder, nor yet in these latter days in which I was living; the essence was the whole storied institution, with all that the winds had blown into it,

* A sermon delivered in the Chapel of New College, Oxford, May 7, 1922.